

From Tactical Media to the Neo-pragmatists of the Web

by

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In an expanding universe, time is on the side of the outcast. Those who once inhabited the suburbs of human contempt find that without changing their address they eventually live in the metropolis.

— Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant*

As the early days of the Internet become a distant memory it can now seem passé or naïve to speak of “the Internet revolution,” but it should not. ¶

The art and activist movements that have arisen in the wake of the internet, have come closer than any of the avant-garde groups of the last two centuries to realizing the modernist utopian dream of universal collective participation in cultural production and the rise of a ‘mass intelligentsia,’ attaining what romantic modernists from Novalis to Joseph Beuys aspired to when they declared “every one an artist.”

The proposition that electronic media could facilitate such a transformation of both culture and democracy precedes the net by several generations. As far back 1932 Brecht’s lecture on the *The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication*, famously proposed a participatory model in which he described radio as the “finest

ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that despite the powerful forces seeking to domesticate the internet, transforming it from the bio-diversity of a ‘creative commons’ into a network of carefully managed ‘walled gardens,’ the drive to expand and intensify the ideal of democracy remains the ‘true north’ of the internet revolution.

I further argue that an expansion of the ideal of democracy based on widening the circle of participation and collaborative expression is linked to the emergence of the ‘user’ as the lead player and primary agent for change replacing both the worker and the more static concept of the consumer. I suggest that the emergence of a ‘user language’ is best understood through the theories developed by the cultural theorist de Certeau whose work became influential in the cultural studies milieu of the 1980s. I show how a decade later a media orientated interpretation of de Certeau’s ideas inspired the ‘tactical media’ movement; a distinctive combination of art, technological experimentation, and political activism that arose in the early 1990s and successfully exploited the cracks already appearing in the edifice of traditional broadcast media as the internet began to take hold.

Finally I examine the possibility that unlike the failure of utopian ideals associated with 20th century broadcast media the equivalent ideals associated with the Internet are proving far more resilient. I conclude by suggesting reasons for the persistence of these emancipatory narratives and examine various experimental platforms suggesting that the utopian avant-garde perspective of the early Internet, though continually under threat, remains a potent force whose energies are far from exhausted.

possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him.”²

Although this drive for mass participation has been at the core of utopian avant-garde art for generations it was generally believed that this possibility of mass *dis-alienation* existed only as potential, a potential that the masses simply did not have the power to actualize. However an alternative view emerged with the publication in 1980 of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, in which the Jesuit Scholar Michel de Certeau proposed that an invisible world of mass cultural participation far from being a distant utopia already existed albeit surreptitiously in a twilight realm of what he called “the tactical.”

Although computer technology was not a primary concern to de Certeau, it was he who substituted the term “user” for the less active “consumer” describing the purpose his work as bringing to light “... the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term ‘consumers.’”³ This substitution was influential in creating an alternative to academic cultural studies based on the politics of representation shifting the emphasis towards a more active practice orientated ‘user language.’ This prescient emphasis on user participation contributed to the emergence of a new perspective in which the consumer was recognized as equally important as the worker and in which the key power relations were analyzed in terms of the dichotomy he introduced between strategies and tactics.

THE USER LANGUAGE OF EVERY DAY LIFE

“Every day life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.”⁴ So wrote de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a book which arrived at a much richer and more supple picture of the realities of cultural politics than were available as the staple diet of the Cultural Studies movement of the period. In place of an identity politics based on critiques of media representations, de Certeau introduced a less deterministic emphasis on the *uses* to which audiences put media representations, the multiple ways in which these forms are tactically appropriated and repurposed by consumers.

For de Certeau cultural production could only be fully understood as multiple acts of co-creation in which the consumer was never passive recipient but rather an active though unequal, participant in the creation of meaning. Above all he saw the act of consumption as a form of production. “To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds another production, called “consumption.”⁵ de Certeau provide a language appropriate to profound changes in social, economic, and power relations taking place “where the figure of the consumer takes center stage alongside (or even instead of) the worker, or better where these two figures are merged. Hardt and Negri thus speak of “affective labor.”⁶

At the core of *The Practice of Every Day Life* is the distinction between *tactics* and *strategies*. Although consumers are full participants in the creation of meaning it is nevertheless a highly unequal relationship. He defines strategy “as a calculus of force relationships when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an ‘environment.’”⁷ ...a place where it can “capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances.”⁸ In contrast he describes the tactical

in more labile, and poetic terms that suggest a distinctive style *in which the weak are seeking to turn the tables on the strong*.

Tactics must depend on:

*clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning,’ maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries poetic as well as warlike they go back to the immemorial [...] intelligence displayed in the tricks and imitations of plants and fishes. From the depths of the ocean to the streets of the modern megalopolises, there is a continuity and permanence of these tactics.*⁹

When de Certeau began to write of tactics in the late 1970s he was describing a largely speculative and barely visible twilight realm. Invisibility and subterfuge was part of the point, to a degree he was making a virtue out of a necessity. As he put it:

*The “making” in question is a production, a poesis’ – but a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of “production” (television, urban development, commerce, etc)... it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.*¹⁰

FROM INVISIBLE TACTICS TO TACTICAL MEDIA

Although de Certeau’s ideas became influential among cultural studies theorists of the 1980s it was not until the early 1990’s that mass access to cheap and easy to use media put these powerful expressive tools in the hands of users. It was this fact that propelled de Certeau’s twilight world of barely visible tactics into

the light of day. With visibility came the reflexivity that enabled a new and increasingly self-conscious form of cultural practice to emerge. A constellation of distinctive but overlapping practices: artists, hackers, political activists, independent media makers coalesced into a previously un-named movement which a network of artists and activists associated with the Amsterdam based festival The Next 5 Minutes, dubbed *tactical media*.¹¹ The name stuck and (for better and for worse) the ‘brand’ stubbornly persists.

Tactical media gave a temporary home to a growing number of artists who whilst repudiating the politics of the contemporary ‘art world’ were unwilling to relinquish the utopian legacy of the avant-garde which (in contrast to the disciplinary regimes of party politics) placed a high value on the liberating power of expression in politics. This ‘Expressivism’ can be traced back to the eighteenth century Romantic rebellion against the rationalist utilitarianism of the Enlightenment and was the first major social movement in which artists played a central role. In part this was because of the inspiration drawn from the movement’s founding philosophers particularly Herder and Novalis whose writings gave a new significance to the power of language (or expression), proposing that “in a world of contingent horizons, our sense of meaning depends, critically, on our powers of expression...” and “that discovering a framework of meaning is interwoven with invention.”¹² The centrality of the expressive dimension in Romanticism accounts for the important role played by artists, but with the important caveat that the spiritual freedoms and possibilities of self-creation enjoyed by artists were also the rightful legacy of all human subjects. Connecting these deeply rooted historical aspirations of universal expressive participation to new media is a key factor in understanding how the ideal of democracy has been transformed ever since its fate became linked to the internet.

In an essay written in 2006 I described how in the early phase of tactical media. The power some of us attributed to this new 'media politics' appeared to be borne out by the role that all forms of media seemed to have played in the collapse of the Soviet Empire. At the time it seemed as though old style armed insurrection had been superseded by digital dissent and media revolutions. It was as if the Samizdat spirit, extended and intensified by the proliferation of Do-it-yourself media, had rendered the centralized statist tyrannies of the Soviet Union untenable. Some of us allowed ourselves to believe that it would only be a matter of time before the same forces would challenge our own tired and tarnished oligarchies.

As late as 1999 in his Reith lecture, Anthony Giddens could still confidently assert that "[t]he information monopoly, upon which the Soviet system was based, had no future in an intrinsically open framework of global communications."¹³ Since then it is not only the advent of the Chinese firewall that might make him less certain of his case, it is also that the corporations which effectively mediate the access to the internet (Google and FaceBook) have themselves exhibited monopolistic tendencies.

The principal point I was making in 2006 when the social media were still embryonic, was to plea for this generation of media activists to relinquish the cult of 'ephemerality' – one of the shibboleths of both contemporary art and tactical media. I argued that the time had come to replace hit and run guerrilla activism with "longer-term commitments and deeper engagements with the people and organisations networked around contested issues."

Subsequent manifestations of the spirit of Tactical Media have indeed succeeded in both consolidating their platforms and scaling up their ambitions. Large scale platforms such as Indymedia, WikiLeaks, Moveon.

org and Avaaz have in a various ways succeeded in challenging the status quo and leveraging world public opinion in ways unimagined by previous generations and transcending the culture of small scale homeopathic interventions that were the signature of the early period of tactical media.

RECUPERATING THE UTOPIAN MOMENT

Tactical Media had succeeded in re-igniting the impulse behind successive generations of avant-garde utopian art movements in which the role of artists was envisioned as being to liberate a potential for art making (or the creative principal) in everyone. A potential whose field was aesthetic but whose horizon was political.¹⁴

And perhaps most surprising of all, in the second decade of the new millennium it is this most radical interpretation of the cyber-prophets which has succeeded in capturing, under the general rubric of, 'user generated content,' mainstream public enthusiasm and even commercial success. Clay Shirkey is not untypical of the many scholarly cheer leaders (including Manuel Castells, Yochai Benklar) when he claims that we are witnessing "the greatest enhancement of communicative expression since the invention of the printing press."¹⁵

In stark contrast to these euphoric narratives however we see an increasing number of skeptical voices emerging. Commentators such as Evgeny Morozov have suggested that those of us attributing revolutionary potential to these media are living through a 'net delusion.' An even more cogent critic is media theorist Jodie Dean, who has characterized the narratives of tactical media as "communicative capitalism's perfect lure 'in which' subjects feel themselves to be active, even as their every action reinforces the status

quo. Revelation can be allowed even celebrated and furthered because its results remain ineffectual."¹⁶

Providing these critiques with an important historical perspective is the book *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*, by scholar and policy advocate, Tim Wu, in which he described what he called the "long cycle" a process whereby open information systems become consolidated and closed over time. In this process whenever a new and radical media technology arises (print, film, radio, television, internet) it is inevitably accompanied by utopian visions of social and political transformation (as we saw with Brecht and radio) only to move inexorably to a closed and controlled industry, "a typical progression from somebody's hobby to somebody's industry to somebody's empire."¹⁷

NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

It is possible to imagine that de Certeau would have been initially gratified by the degree to which the tactical 'user' he championed has emerged as the 'prime mover' of the web 2.0 era. He would however have noted that not only is his dichotomy between the tactical and the strategic positions still intact, it also continues to be accompanied by the asymmetrical balance of power. Closer analysis would however have revealed that the Internet's distributed architecture means that the rules of engagement have changed, creating new spaces for both user agency and their control in equal measure.

Unlike the settled domesticated parklands of the broadcast media world, the Internet has been compared to the raucous bio-diversity of a rainforest. This can sometimes lead to suggestions of chaos or lack of structure, and have lead to metaphors suggesting a landscape that is 'out of control.' But nothing could be further from the truth. The Internet works

because of not despite structure. Like any language, its technological grammar simultaneously constrains and enables. Media theorist, Alex Galloway has named this enabling and constraining structure of the internet a *Protocol*, in his illuminating book of the same name. Eschewing narratives of 'the virtual' Galloway's staunchly materialist description demonstrates how the Internet's historically unique features are founded on a set of technical and behavioral arrangements: "Standards governing the implementation of specific technologies. Like their diplomatic predecessors, computer protocols establish specific points necessary to enact an agreed upon standard of action."¹⁸

Adding a new layer of technical understanding and analysis to Manuel Castells's concept of the "network society," Galloway distinguishes different kinds of network identifying the specific form of the "distributed network" as the basis for 'the protocol' behind the Internet. According to Galloway, "[b]y design protocols such as Internet protocols cannot be centralized."¹⁹ In part III of *Protocol*, Galloway proposes what he calls "Protocol Futures" resistance not to reject the technologies but to "direct these protocological technologies, whose distributed structure is empowering indeed, toward what Hans Magnus Enzensberger calls an "emancipated media" created by active social actors rather than passive users."²⁰

Those who control the infrastructure and configure the protocols of the social web may preach open standards but they are in reality far from transparent. Drawing on the work of media scholar Felix Stalder, we could locate the tactical and the strategic domains of the web.2.0 era in what Stalder calls the *front-end* and the *back-end*. The *front-end* where the actions may be "decentralized, ad-hoc, cheap, easy-to-use, community-oriented, and transparent" and the *back-end*, which are "centralized, based on long-term planning, very expensive, difficult-to-run, corporate, and

opaque. If the personal blog symbolizes one side, the data-center represents the other.” “...there is a growing tension between the dynamics on the front-end (where users interact) and on the back-end (to which the owners have access).”²¹

An example of how the contradictions between back end and front end are playing out in practice could be observed in a skirmish, which took place during the media coverage of the London Olympics. In this incident the Los Angeles based journalist Guy Adams, reporting for the Independent, an important UK national daily, tweeted about the poor coverage given to the opening ceremony by NBC. Adams concluded his tweet by transmitting the corporate address of the boss of NBC urging people to send tweets and e-mails. Twitter immediately suspended his account. It later emerged that Twitter had alerted NBC in order to trigger a complaint and so legitimize the suspension. Behind this apparently trivial conflict was the fact that Twitter and NBC had established a commercial partnership to transmit the Olympics. It was the first content partnership Twitter had ever established with a broadcaster of this size. The kinds of tensions on display are clear enough, the avowed commitment of Twitter to being an open platform committed to free speech trumped by the need to keep an important commercial partner happy. The immediate consequence of the suspended account was an uprising from the Twitter user community with hash tag, “NBC fail” or “fail NBC.” As a result three weeks later the account was reinstated along with an apology in a Twitter blog post saying “we apologize we did alert NBC official and that was wrong.” The same kind of tensions between stated ideology and the realities of strategic power relationships could be seen on a much larger stage when state power is threatened by the new power of apparently weaker players.

At the beginning of 2010 Hilary Clinton gave a speech lauding the internet revolution along with the role of the web 2.0 platforms in the uprisings in the Middle East, in terms that would have been recognized by both the father of media theory Marshal McLuhan as well as later tactical media theorists, when she described the net not only as “the nervous system of the planet” but also as the “samizdat of our day.”

If nothing else, her direct appeals to global public opinion demonstrated the degree to which the Internet has transformed mainstream ideas about what constitutes a modern democracy. However, the contradictions at the heart of the current landscape were revealed within a matter of months when Clinton was to be found addressing a hastily convened state department press conference to condemn the WikiLeaks Iraqi exposé as “not just an attack on America’s foreign policy interests it was an attack on the international community.” Clearly the “Samizdat” culture she had been celebrating just a few months earlier was to be celebrated until it impinged upon American power.

PEOPLE DON'T WANT MASTERS

In a much quoted piece of research carried out in 2003 the renowned sociologist of networks Manuel Castells identified an example of how behavior and attitudes of Catalonian computer users were being mirrored in behavior away from computers:

*The more an individual has a project of autonomy (personal, professional, socio/political, communicative) the more she uses the Internet. And in a time space sequence the more he/she uses the Internet, the more autonomous she becomes vis-à-vis societal rules and institutions.*²²

Increasingly this horizontal networking and increased autonomy also expresses itself as a deepening distrust of traditional models of governance and leadership. One of the primary observable characteristics of the new social movements such as Occupy, is that they are largely *movements without leaders*. It would be inconceivable for any of them to say, as the British Labour party said on winning the election in 1945 “we are the masters now.” “It just happens that people don’t want more masters. And that is both very complicated but is very interesting.” (*Manuel Castells in conversation with journalist Paul Mason at the LSE.*)²³

In 2012 at a public discussion Paul Mason touched the nub of the issue when he put the following partly rhetorical question to Castells: “Mandela *did*, Martin Luther King *did* [working with] hierarchical movements, working with a goal, a program and a leadership. Why do we worship the spontaneity of the network protest?” “Because” replies Castells “people don’t trust leaders anymore..” “It took 20-30 years from the arrival of mass industrialization to the point when the union power and the labor movement became part of political institutions [...]” “It is a long journey from the minds of people to the institutions of society.” Castells is arguing that the transformation he believes to be underway is occurring “not through organized politics in the same way. Because networks are different, networks don’t need hierarchical organizations.”²⁴

People may not want masters or hierarchies but for now the established concentrations of wealth and power remain impervious to change. For those whom the ‘true north’ of the internet revolution remains the pursuit of expanded forms of democracy, this lack of progress leads us to continuously return to the same question: how do we organize democratic governance differently in a digital age? There is no teleological guarantee of progressive outcomes. Neither will progress be the outcome of neatly implemented strategies.

It will be hit and miss, trial and error. Install, update, crash, restart, de-install, a digital version of Becket’s dictum “Fail, fail again, fail better.”

THE NEO-PRAGMATISTS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

In order to bring about radical change in the world you don’t need to be controversial. You can stand squarely with the vast majority of people and still have a revolutionary agenda for change.

— Ricken Patel, Co-founder and Director of Avaaz (interview 2008 BBC World - Hard Talk)

Communication tools don’t get socially interesting until they get technologically boring.

— Clay Shirkey, *Here Comes Everybody*

So where are the organizational experiments, the trial and error stories?

In an ambitious extended essay, Digital Solidarity, Felix Stalder has recently set out to link the newly emerging forms of agency and subjectivity associated with the digital realm to the collective arrival of major new forms of solidarity. He goes on to draw up what he calls “an inventory of forms, reduced to four basic types: commons, assemblies, swarms and weak networks.”²⁵

Alongside this inventory I would add the well established genre of the ‘*succès de scandale*’ such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous, a genre whose stock in trade is ‘provocation.’ This is a well established ritual that has been the signature tune of modernism since the riot that attended the premier of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* guaranteed subsequent packed houses. Ever since to be *radical* has become indistinguishable from being *controversial*. We also see how the disruptive impact that the internet has wrought on the retail

sector is now beginning to be felt in the mainstream political sphere as insurgents and upstarts such as the Italian maverick anti-politician Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) has undercut the Italian political establishment by deploying the web (initially through his blog which effectively bypassed Berlusconi's domination of traditional broadcast media) to aggregate opinion and votes without recourse to a conventional party political structures.

At the other end of the spectrum we have what I argue are best described as the 'Neo-pragmatists' of the web. This is a tendency, which began in 1998 with the launch of MoveOn.org. This project was founded by two successful silicon valley entrepreneurs, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, who after selling their software company, Berkeley Systems for a close to \$14 million, went on to found the web based campaigning and advocacy network MoveOn.org. MoveOn developed the techniques later adopted and adapted by numerous imitators that represent a key development in nature of how to do political activism and enact democracy through the Internet.

By successfully mobilizing millions of users around *issues* rather than party affiliations or affinity groups, MoveOn and their ilk highlight the way in which it is the objects of politics (the issues) that call the subjects of politics (the public) into being.

Knowingly or unknowingly this approach reflects and extends some of the key conclusions the American Pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey drew from his extended published dialogue with Walter Lipmann in the 1920s. The Dutch theorist, Noortje Maares has written extensively and illuminatingly on how concepts drawn from the Dewey - Lipmann debates can help us to re-think the nature and role of the public in the democracies of the internet age. Maares describes Dewey as arguing that you "cannot separate out the

content, the issues from the subjects ...the only way a public gets pulled into politics, is through content. The indirect consequences of action that people are affected by, is what calls a public into being."²⁶

This is a position that flies in the face of those who believe that to give weight to *issues* is to instrumentalize the political passions at the heart of democracy. But for Dewey it was absurd "to assume that the political passions that are so revered by democrats can be isolated from the issues at stake in politics.... Political passions, Dewey argued, are evoked by virtue of being implicated in an issue..."²⁷

From the outset MoveOn reflected these principles. It began as a single-issue electronic mailing list based on outrage at the paralysis of American politics due to the Monica Lewinski scandal. It began as simply passing around an e-mail petition to "censure President Clinton and 'move on'" as an alternative to the impeachment. As they refined and developed their methods MoveOn evolved into an ongoing political experiment campaigning on a range of issues from policy on Iraq through to FaceBook's approach to user privacy. The key to MoveOn's success and continuing influence has been its capacity to use crowd sourcing to raise millions of dollars to support its campaigns. Their capacity to use the web to aggregate mass public opinion through petitions, polls and fund raising combined with more traditional forms of grass roots organizing has implications that shift the emphasis of politics from party politics to moving particular issues forward.

The background of Blade and Boyd brought a particular set of technical and organizational attitudes to the table, which helped to define the character of this movement. Their experience as new media developers with a strong business background meant that from the outset their activism was founded on a

pragmatic understanding of the dynamics required for this technology to engage with and broaden the circle of participants.

This professionalization or (as some would claim) corporatization of activism has spawned numerous imitators including 38Degrees and Change.org and most significantly, the MoveOn spin off Avaaz, which means 'voice' in a number of languages, founded in 2007. Avaaz began with the ambition of taking the philosophy and web savvy formulas pioneered by MoveOn to develop an international constituency to address global issues.

At the time of writing Avaaz has passed the threshold of 20 million members, making it the world's largest activist network, giving it a global reach and scale that has taken the concept of web-based activism to the next level. However the decision to situate Avaaz on the international stage is not only a question of scale, it also follows extends an important aspect of neo-pragmatist logic which is that appealing to a global constituency aspires to short circuit the power games that bedevil national politics.

The key characteristic of all of these groups is the low threshold of commitment required for membership. This policy was present at the outset at 1998 with MoveOn where to be a 'member' requires no subscription, in fact nothing other than a single action, which could be as little as signing an on-line petition or joining a forum discussion. It is this ease of entry that is in part responsible for enabling these organizations to accumulate such vast memberships. Their critics point to this fact as being their greatest weakness. But on the contrary it is their understanding of how the web enables the aggregation of millions of small contributions into large effects that represents their greatest innovation. In an interview with BBC's 'Hardtalk' just a year after it was founded, Avaaz's co-founder and di-

rector Ricken Patel described his core demographic as "*the Mum with not a lot of time to spare [who] appreciates a service where she can use the small amount of money or time that she has to give..*"²⁸ When challenged on the blandness of his corporate image Patel is unapologetic and made what I would argue is the core claim of the neo-pragmatists of the web, "*In order to bring about radical change in the world you don't need to be controversial. You can stand squarely with the vast majority of people and still have a revolutionary agenda for change.*"²⁹ This statement captures the essence of this era's transformation from the heroic pioneering days of the net when only radicals and geeks participated to the era of the social web. As Clay Shirkey put it in his aptly named book, *Here Comes Everybody*: "Communication tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring."³⁰

It is precisely this ease of participation that radical commentators find so problematic. Traditionally the essence of radical politics has been personal sacrifice, solidarity and above all, commitment. For those who take their politics seriously the web pragmatists represent the junk food of politics, to be dismissed as "Slacktivism" the "Clicktivists" or as Žižek dubbed the process, "interpassivity."

As a result they have become a fashionable target of radical critics and artists such as Les Liens Invisibles who have generated a number of high profile works parodying these platforms, which they characterise as armchair activism. In one such work they developed an online petition service *31Repetitionr*, commissioned by the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol. They developed an app to 'broaden your armchair activism horizons' to which they added the slogan 'Tweet for Action, Augment your Reaction' encouraging people to create their 'own insurrection' using the communications and image strategies of an advertising campaign. Parody-

ing what they believe to be the “illusion that corporate social networks can capture the democratic spirit that characterized the utopias of the early phase of the Internet.”³¹

Witty, thought provoking as these projects are it is in fact the artists and the critical commentariat who are the real conservatives, clinging to their avant-garde rituals and tribal affiliations every bit as much as the mainstream Italian political parties who were put on the back foot by Beppe Grillo's M5S. If the disruptive technologies of the Internet have transformed every other sector from commerce to journalism why should avant-garde radical art and politics be the exception? Far from representing a philosophical contradiction the corporate look and feel of these groups is wholly consistent with the neo-pragmatist creed in order to bring about radical change in the world you don't need to be controversial.³²

At the beginning of 2013 Avaaz continued their commitment to re-imaging democracy in ways that Dewey might recognize through the enactment of their annual consultation process, a large-scale experiment in democratic consultation. It combined a detailed polling exercise involving millions of its members, in 14 languages and in excess of a hundred countries, combined with intense online discussions covering numerous issues. The poll and accompanying on-line discussions covered questions of detail involving the identification of which specific campaigns to support. But it also looked at meta questions relating to the governance of Avaaz. For example it looked at how the permanent staff should respond to the results of the poll itself, asking whether it should be seen as a guide or a binding mandate. A large majority came out in favor of using the data as a guide rather than a binding mandate. The fact that the organization is entirely financed by contributions from members leads Avaaz to claim that its members are the bosses and it

has compared the role of Patel and his staff as that of the president or prime minister being briefed by informed civil servants. The question of how campaigns are selected and promoted is part of the key issue of governance and the balance between how nudges from the Avaaz staff in one direction or another is tricky and can all too easily lead to charges of bias.

As with Grillo and web guru Casaleggio's role with M5S, and Assange's role with WikiLeaks, Patel's charismatic presence with Avaaz is far from unproblematic, particularly where Avaaz appeared to be making excessive claims for its role in helping journalists to escape from Syria in 2012. Patel has recently put this error down to the fog of war. But mistakes are the inevitable price of genuine engagement and should not lead to the default position of knowing cynicism. All of these groups including Avaaz have had the vision to step out of the established conception of how to do democratic politics and into the new hybrid spaces that combine the virtual and the street, which inevitably entails risk and contradiction. It is only from this actual practice including a willingness to fail and fail again that the vital renewal of democratic politics imminent to the age of networks will emerge. ■

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